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Sri Lankans also seeking answers

Tsunami killed 30,000 in a day

By RYAN LaFONTAINE

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BAY ST. LOUIS - They are from far different sides of the globe, but they share a goal in recovering from two of the world's worst natural disasters.

Officials from Bay St. Louis and Sri Lanka are vowing to be better prepared the next time disaster strikes.

Sri Lankan government representatives exchanged ideas Thursday with local leaders on recovery and readiness. The South Asian island nation has been recovering from devastation since December 2004, when a tsunami washed over nearly a dozen nations.

"In our country, it was the poorest of the poor that hurt the most," said Indira Fernando, a Sri Lankan disaster management coordinator.

More than 30,000 people were killed in Sri Lanka alone, but apart from the stunning death toll, one of the most glaring differences between the two disasters was warning time. Any alert at all may have save thousands of lives in Sri Lanka.

Many South Mississippians were securing their homes and evacuating days before Katrina smashed into the Coast. Sunbathers were enjoying tropical beaches when the tsunami struck Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan officials are here training to use the Incident Command System, a structured method of responding to emergencies, which is implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of the nation's \$16.6 million pledge to help develop an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system.

Fernando and her colleagues had many questions for local leaders. They wanted to know about the chain of command and what was done during the first 48 hours after the storm. They asked whether people would need to rebuild their homes higher above sea level and whether the U.S. government has offered aid to homeowners.

Public Works Director Ronnie Vanney gave a detailed account of what was done before the storm to secure the city's water and sewer system and what was done after to patch it back together.

Councilman Jeff Reed explained how survivors hankered for vital information, such as where to get water and ice, hot meals, tents and blue roofs.

After a tour of the Bay, S.K. Shankar, inspector general of police in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo, wanted to know why so many residents have not yet returned home.

"Housing," said Buz Olsen, the Bay's chief of operations. "Many people are still waiting on grants that were promised to them months ago."

Shankar said the insight gathered this week is critical to his nation, which, like South Mississippi, faces a long and daunting road to recovery.

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